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ABSTRACT

Twenty-four tenth-grade students were randomly assigned to three groups as part of a study of the effects of teacher comments on student essays. Throughout the course, one group received comments to indicate faults, one group received comments correcting errors, and one group received comments designed to foster thinking. At the beginning and end of the course, students wrote a sample essay and completed a short questionnaire to measure attitude toward writing. Essays were scored holistically and were also analyzed for spelling errors, agreement errors, capitalization errors, run-ons, fragments, vocabulary (measured by average word length), single word modifiers, subordinate clauses, and depth of subordination between sentences. Of twelve analyses of covariance, the only significant difference occurred for vocabulary; growth on this measure favored the group receiving comments designed to foster thinking. It was concluded that the different types of teacher comments produce about the same improvement in student writing ability. (AA)

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TEACHER COMMENTS ON STUDENT ESSAYS:

IT DOESN'T MATTER WHAT YOU SAY

by

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and
Sandra Arthur

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Most teachers cringe at the thought of grading student essays. But they do it because, as all good English teachers know, the type and quantity of comments that you make on student essays serves to improve the writing of students. When you write on Johnny's theme awk, cap, sp, w.w., Johnny takes those comments to heart and corrects his mistakes the next time around--right? Well, maybe. Actually, whether or not teacher made comments on student themes improves student writing is an empirical question. Because it is, the authors of this manuscript attempted to answer the research question: What effects do various types of teacher comments have on students' writing performance?

Three types of teacher commenting styles were selected for the study. They were: (1) commenting to indicate faults, (2) commenting to correct and (3) commenting to foster thinking. These three basic techniques have been described by Burton (1975). Commenting to indicate faults refers to the style in which the teacher marks students' mistakes via some type of code. Figure 1 illustrates this convention.

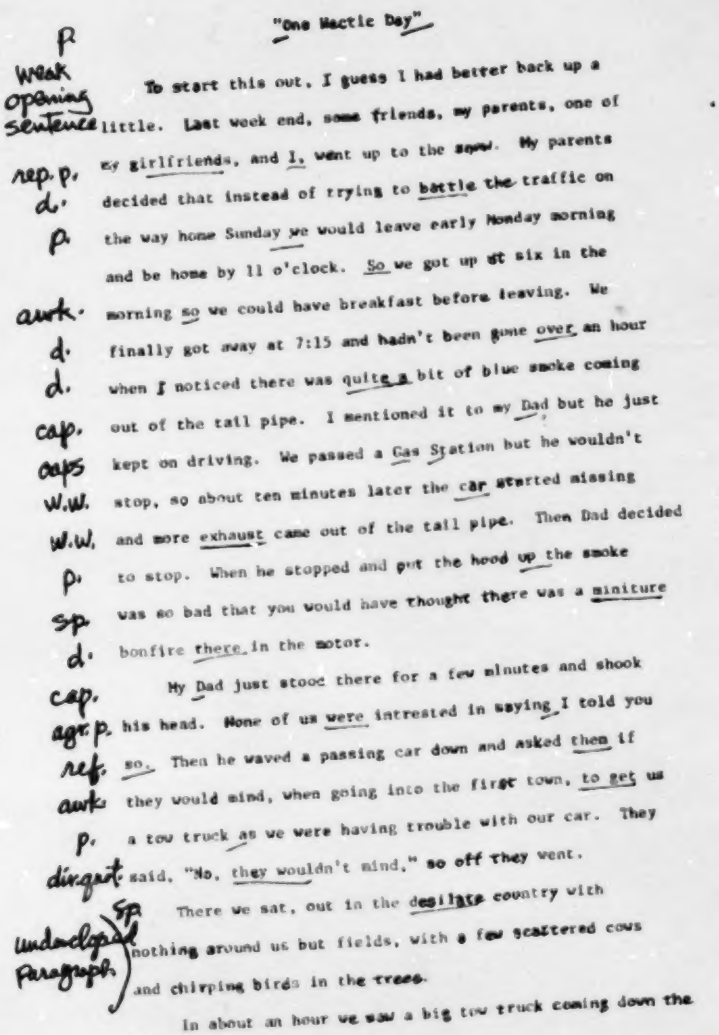
Figure 1 goes here

Marking to correct refers to the practice of editing student papers. Errors are corrected for the student, but no comments are made regarding the content of the themes. Figure 2 illustrates this approach.

Figure 2 goes here

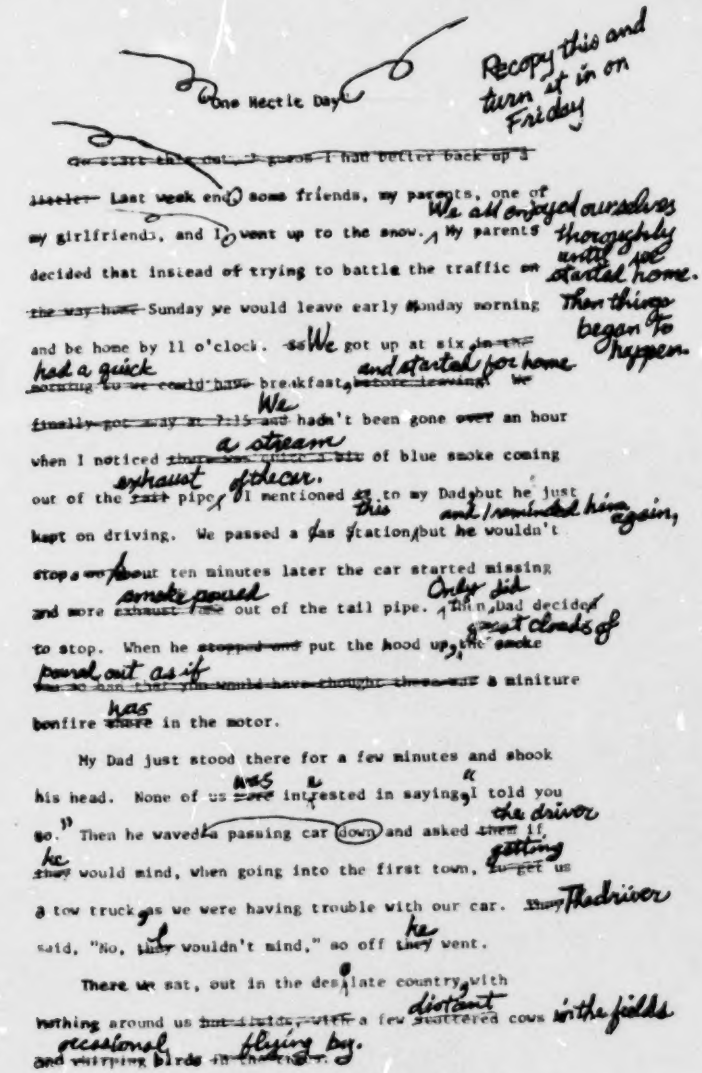
Marking to foster thinking involves the teacher commenting very subjectively on the content and impact of the essays. Little, although some attention

Figure 1: Commenting to Indicate Faults*


p
"One Hectic Day"
Weak opening sentence
To start this out, I guess I had better back up a
rep. p.
little. Last week end, some friends, my parents, one of
d.
my girlfriends, and I, went up to the snow. My parents
p.
decided that instead of trying to battle the traffic on
awk.
the way home Sunday we would leave early Monday morning
d.
and be home by 11 o'clock. So we got up at six in the
d.
morning so we could have breakfast before leaving. We
cap.
finally got away at 7:15 and hadn't been gone over an hour
caps
when I noticed there was quite a bit of blue smoke coming
w.w.
out of the tail pipe. I mentioned it to my Dad but he just
w.w.
kept on driving. We passed a Gas Station but he wouldn't
p.
stop, so about ten minutes later the car started missing
sp.
and more exhaust came out of the tail pipe. Then Dad decided
d.
to stop. When he stopped and put the hood up the smoke
cap.
was so bad that you would have thought there was a miniture
agr. p.
bonfire there in the motor.
ref.
My Dad just stood there for a few minutes and shook
awk.
his head. None of us were intrested in saying I told you
p.
so. Then he waved a passing car down and asked them if
dirgat
they would mind, when going into the first town, to get us
Sp
a tow truck as we were having trouble with our car. They
underclopped Paragraph
said, "No, they wouldn't mind," so off they went.
There we sat, out in the desilate country with
nothing around us but fields, with a few scattered cows
and chirping birds in the trees.
In about an hour we saw a big tow truck coming down the

*Figures 1-3 are from Burton (1975), pp.150-152.

Figure 2:Commenting to Correct



is paid to errors. Comments are generally in the form of questions which if answered by the students should serve to point out their mistakes. Figure 3 illustrates this third type of commentary.

Figure 3 goes here

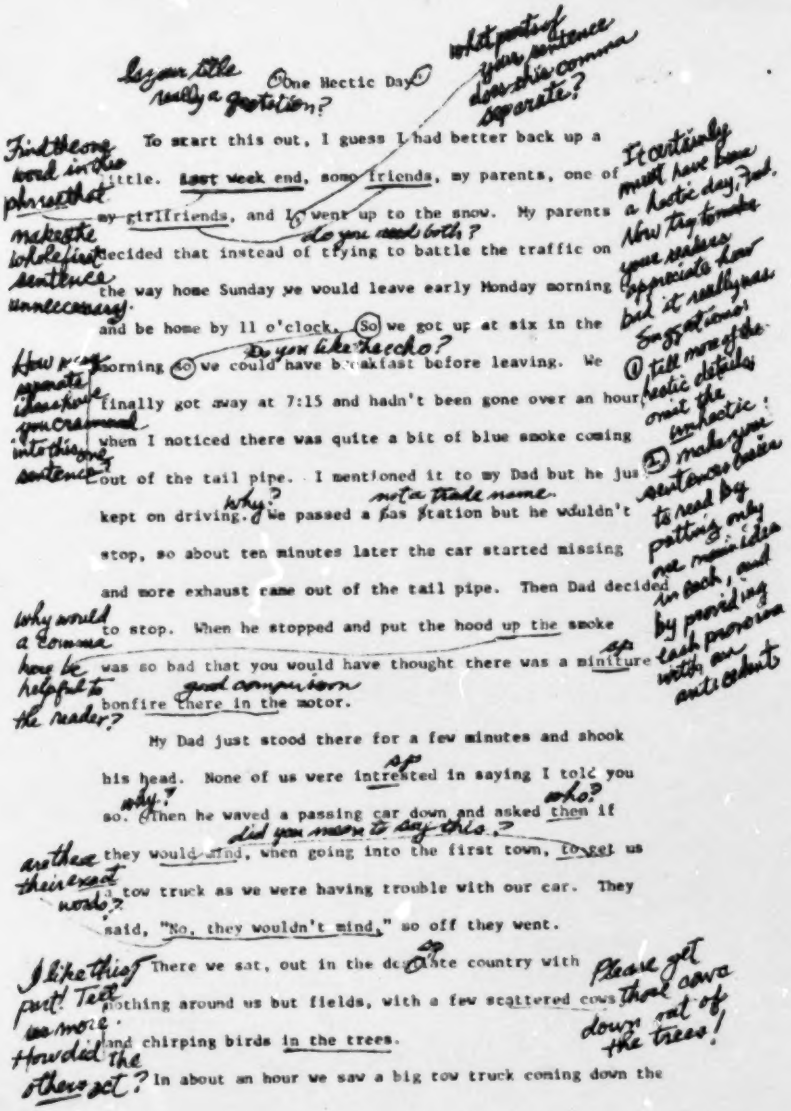
To answer the research question, 24 tenth grade students of approximately equal IQ and academic ability (as determined by grade point average) were randomly assigned to three groups--one group of eight for each type of marking system. All 24 students were assigned to the same writing course in their school. Thus, such extraneous yet possibly intervening effects such as "time of day" and "teacher" were controlled for.

As a pretest all students were required to write a sample essay at the beginning of the course. Students were also given, as a pretest, a short questionnaire (Likert type items) which measured their attitude toward writing. During the course all students received the same instruction and were required to write the same number and type of essays. The only difference in treatment among the three groups was the type of comments they received on their essays. Group 1 received comments to indicate faults (Figure 1); group 2 received comments to correct (Figure 2); group 3, comments to foster thinking (Figure 3).

At the end of the course the students were asked to write an essay and again were given an attitudinal questionnaire. These were used as postests. The pre and posttest essays were then scored holistically for quality by two judges who did not know to which group the essays belonged. The pre and posttest essays were also analyzed in terms of:

(1) the relative frequency of spelling errors (SPELLING)

Figure 3: Commenting to Foster Thinking


Is your title really a quotation?
One Hectic Day
What part of your sentence does this comma separate?
To start this out, I guess I had better back up a
little. Last week end, some friends, my parents, one of
my girlfriends, and I went up to the snow. My parents
decided that instead of trying to battle the traffic on
the way home Sunday we would leave early Monday morning
and be home by 11 o'clock. So we got up at six in the
morning so we could have breakfast before leaving. We
finally got away at 7:15 and hadn't been gone over an hour
when I noticed there was quite a bit of blue smoke coming
out of the tail pipe. I mentioned it to my Dad but he just
kept on driving. We passed a gas station but he wouldn't
stop, so about ten minutes later the car started missing
and more exhaust came out of the tail pipe. Then Dad decided
to stop. When he stopped and put the hood up the smoke
was so bad that you would have thought there was a miniture
bonfire there in the motor.
My Dad just stood there for a few minutes and shook
his head. None of us were intrested in saying I told you
so. Then he waved a passing car down and asked them if
they would mind, when going into the first town, to get us
a tow truck as we were having trouble with our car. They
said, "No, they wouldn't mind," so off they went.
There we sat, out in the deserate country with
nothing around us but fields, with a few scattered cows
and chirping birds in the trees.
In about an hour we saw a big tow truck coming down the
Find the one word in the phrase that makes the whole first sentence unnecessary.
Do you need both?
How many separate ideas have you crammed into this one sentence?
Do you like the echo?
Why?
not a trade name
Why would a comma help the reader?
good comparison
up
who?
why?
did you mean to say this?
are these their exact words?
up
I like this part! Tell us more. How did the others act?
Please get those cows out of the trees!
It certainly must have been a hectic day. Now try to make your readers appreciate how bad it really was.
Suggestions:
1. Tell more of the hectic details; omit the technical.
2. Make your sentences easier to read by putting only one main idea in each, and by providing each pronoun with an antecedent.

(2) the relative frequency of agreement errors (AGREEMENT)

(3) the relative frequency of capitalization errors (CAPITALIZATION)

(4) the relative use of runons (RUNONS)

(5) the relative use of fragments (FRAGMENTS)

(6) vocabulary as measured by average word length (VOCAB)

(7) relative use of single word modifiers (SWM)

(8) relative use of phrases as modifiers (PHRASES)

(9) relative use of subordinate clauses (CLAUSES)

(10) development of thesis sentence as measured by average depth of subordination between sentences (BETWEEN SENT. SUB)

The above ten measures have been shown to be strong predictors of composition quality (Marzano and Di Stefano, 1976)

Analyses of covariance were run using the pretest scores as covariates and the posttest scores as dependent measures with the group specification as the independent variable. In all, 12 analyses of covariance were run. Table 1 reports the results of those analyses.

TABLE 1

ANCOVA Summary Table

Analysis Number	Covariate	Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	Significance of F Ratio
1	SPELLING pre	SPELLING post	GROUP	NS
2	AGREEMENT pre	AGREEMENT post	GROUP	NS
3	CAPITALIZATION pre	CAPITALIZATION post	GROUP	NS
4	RUNONS pre	RUNONS post	GROUP	NS
5	FRAGMENTS pre	FRAGMENTS post	GROUP	NS
6	VOCAB pre	VOCAB post	GROUP	S
7	SWM pre	SWM post	GROUP	NS
8	PHRASES pre	PHRASES post	GROUP	NS
9	CLAUSES pre	CLAUSES post	GROUP	NS
10	B. SENT. SUB pre	B. SENT. SUB post	GROUP	NS
11	QUALITY pre	QUALITY post	GROUP	NS
12	ATTITUDE pre	ATTITUDE post	GROUP	NS

*S = significant $> .05$
NS = not significant

As Table 1 illustrates, there was only one significant F ratio for the adjusted means between groups for the 12 analyses. That significant F ratio occurred when VOCAB was used as the dependent measure. For that measure, the commentary to indicate fault (Figure 1) and to correct (Figure 2) groups had almost identical means; the commentary to foster thinking group had a much higher mean. One interpretation of this significant result is that commentary to foster thinking improves the vocabulary in student writing much more than the other two types of commenting. However, since 12 separate analyses of covariance were conducted (all with -.05 significance levels) there was a .48 probability ($1.00-.95^{12}$) that at least one analyses would be significant by chance alone. This of course, greatly weakens any interpretation that could be given to that one significant result. It is of great interest to note that students in all three groups improved on their posttest scores when compared with pretest scores (via t-tests) but only five of the 36 pre-post, t-test comparisons were significant (.05, one tailed, correlated groups).

What does this all mean to the teacher? The most obvious interpretation of the findings is that different types of teacher comments on student themes produce about the same improvement in student writing ability and that improvement is negligible. Another interpretation is that the treatment was not long enough to produce significant differences among the three treatment groups or between pre and posttest scores. The authors feel that this last interpretation is not consistent with the design used. The treatment continued for a majority of the time that the course lasted. Enough time, in the estimation of the teacher, to produce results if the treatments did have differential effects or any effects at all. Given the random assignment of subjects to groups and the use of analysis of covariance, the

design of the experiment was such that even small effects should have been statistically apparent. Hence the authors conclude that different types of teacher comments on student themes have equally small influences on student writing. For all practical purposes, commenting on student essays might just be an exercise in futility. Either students do not read the comments or they read them and do not attempt to implement suggestions and correct errors.

One factor that was not tested in this experiment was the effect of teacher follow-up on comments. This added factor would produce the following research question: What are the effects on student writing of teacher commentary followed-up by different types of teacher action? For example, it might be the case that one type of teacher commentary (perhaps commenting to correct) significantly improves student writing when coupled with systematic teacher checks on the extent to which students have made the suggested corrections. This implies a two factor experiment--one factor being type of teacher commentary and the other the type of teacher follow-up. This would certainly be a worthy endeavor for some enthusiastic, topic-seeking doctoral student.

Until this two factor issue is settled, it is our recommendation that teachers make as many or as few comments on paper as they wish and of the type that they wish. We are not sure if students read them anyway.

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Marzano, R. and Di Stefano, P. "The Skills of Composition and Their Diagnosis" Mimeographed paper, University of Colorado, 1976.